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ABSTRACT

This paper gives an account of the thoughts of Cornelius Van Til on the contemporary Christian school movement. An account of the historical development of Christian compromise is given, followed by a critique of the compromise among contemporary Christian educators. Van Til claims that any educational position which falls short of being founded exclusively upon the Reformed Faith takes a compromising position with regard to the God of the Bible. The compromise is evident in fundamentalist, evangelical, Lutheran, and Catholic Christian schools. Furthermore, the compromise extends beyond non-Reformed Christian education to include absolute antithesis with all forms of non-Christian education. The paper points out Van Til's assertion that uncompromising Christian education must be built upon the presupposition of the infinite, personal, self-sufficient, triune God of the Bible. Whenever a Christian educator deviates from this foundation, compromise is present. In contrast, all non-Christian educational foundations ultimately rest on the assumption of human autonomy, of brute factual reality, and of logic. These two positions are antithetical. Thus, when Christian educators compromise or accommodate with non-Christian educational foundations, they are inconsistent with and destructive of their own Christian position. (Author/BZ)

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THE EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN SCHOOL MOVEMENT

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THE EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN SCHOOL MOVEMENT

Introduction

Cornelius Van Til claims that any educational position which falls short of being founded exclusively upon the Reformed Faith takes a compromising position with regard to the God of the Bible.[1] The compromise, he believes, is evident in Fundamentalist, Evangelical, Lutheran and Catholic Christian schools. Furthermore, the compromise extends beyond non-Reformed Christian education to include absolute antithesis with all forms of non-Christian education.

In brief, Van Til asserts that uncompromising Christian education must be built exclusively upon the presupposition of the infinite, personal, self-sufficient, triune God of the Bible.[2] Whenever a Christian educator deviates from this foundation, compromise is present. In contrast, Van Til claims that all non-Christian educational foundations ultimately rest on the assumption of human autonomy, of brute factual reality, and of self-subsistent and self-sufficient logic.[3] These two positions are completely anthithetical.[4] Thus, when Christian educators compromise or accommodate with non-Christian educational foundations they are inconsistent and, in fact, are destructive of their own Christian position.

A clear example of contemporary Christian educational compromise is identified when Christian schools use federal or state financial aid. When the U.S. Department of Education appropriates aid to Christian schools, it is contingent upon: public employment, control, and supervision, that services are provided to students at a neutral site, and that no Federal funds be used for religious worship or instruction.[5] Such compliance, Van Til maintains, compromises the position of Christian schools' control and supervision being directed by the Holy Spirit and validated by biblical criteria. Such compliance also compromises God as the sovereign creator and controller of all the universe when Christian schools accept instructional funding for purposes in which God and the biblical perspective must be intentionally ignored. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of a neutral site denies Christian schools' belief that God is Lord of all creation because it contradicts the creation aspect and negates the providential purpose of God.

Starting Point for Christian Education

According to Van Til, the only sufficient position for Christian education to be founded is the presupposition of the sovereign, triune God of the Bible. Only by beginning exclusively with this starting point for all facets of education, and indeed all facets of life, does Van Til believe that Christian education is possible. Also, in conjunction with this starting point, he asserts that it is only when Christian educators build their educational ideology exclusively upon it can they consistently distinguish their view in contrast to the non-Christian views of Plato and Dewey

or uncompromisingly defend their view from non-Christian arguments.[6] In other words, Van Til claims his view of God and the Bible colors all of his thought, deeds, and the entire field of Christian education. For example, in contrast to Dewey, Van Til believes the total learning environment is created by God, controlled by God, and originally interpreted by God or given its true meaning by God. Consequently, the sovereign God, speaking through the Bible in an infallible Word about religion, history, and the cosmos, directs all of his thinking and the entire teaching-learning process. In this view, biblical God-consciousness is directive for all human-consciousness including reason and experience.

The commitment for this all comprehensive educational system is, according to Van Til's Reformed view, entirely in the hands of God. God's grace is extended to some people enabling them to acknowledge the enlightening regeneration by the Holy Spirit when He imputes the righteousness of Christ into their being. Thus, it is taught that God enters into a covenant with man and that some people are to live as covenant-keepers because of biblical regeneration while other men are covenant-breakers because they live in alienation from God's biblical law. Metaphysically, Van Til acknowledges that covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers appear identical but epistemologically, the two types of thinking are mutually exclusive. Therefore, the starting point for Christian educational ideology, in his view, is the convenant relationship between the Creator-God and regenerate man. In addition, this establishes, for Van Til, two types of learners; unregenerate

learners and regenerate learners. Regenerate learners attempt to understand every fact as derivative from God's revelation and to maintain every thought captive to the obedience of Christ while unregenerate learners deny this requisite.

Historical Development of Christian Compromise

Deviation from the sovereign, triune God of the Bible began, according to Van Til's literal view of the Genisis account, with the sin of Adam and Eve. In this account they compromised God and His Word by declaring that they were autonomous and could, on the ground of abstract logic, correctly interpret factual reality apart from God. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, attempted to learn and practice God's law. However, compromise infiltrated when the Hellenization of Orthodox Judaism took hold under Alexander the Great until many Jews assimilated the whole Greek Weltanschauung.[8] The Greek thinkers, from Thales through Aristotle, were in complete antithesis with the Christian position, says Van Til.[9] He believes their teachings do not include the concepts of creation, sin, need of a savior, and responsibility to God. Without these concepts, the whole of Greek epistemology is void of Christian truth. Hence, when Judeo-Christian biblical truth accommodates with Greek thought, compromise is present.

After the life of Christ, many church fathers attempting to further Christianity compromised their Christian foundation.[10] Some Christian neo-platonists substituted God--indeed the revealed trinitarian God--for the Plotinian One.[11] This synthesis of Greek

philosophy and Judeo-Christian religion is compromise to Van Til and is found in Justin Martyr, Iranaeus, Tertullian, Origen, early Augustine, and Aquinas.

Aquinas' teaching dominated the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries until the Reformation, and since within the Roman Catholic Church. He attempted to synthesize Rome's theology with Aristotle's logic. In addition, Aquinas' scholasticism allowed man using reason, to deduce truth from the natural world in a way that was independent of God and the Bible. Thus, the sovereignty of God and the necessity of the Bible are compromised with reason and natural theology.[12] This compromise is characteristic of Aquinas' view and dominates throughout Rome's educational ideology. On the other hand, later Augustine attempted to subject all of education and life to biblical authority. This subjection is absolutely necessary, according to Van Til, in order to avoid educational compromise and it is this distinctive which sets Augustine above and apart from other church fathers and the ancient Greeks.

Renaissance humanism attempted another form of synthesis; Classical Greek thought as the norm for life's interpretation and Christian morality.[13] Yet, once again, Van Til asserts, this harmony is false and inconsistent with an exclusively biblical view. To him, only the traditional and historically Reformed view is exclusively biblical. This Reformed view came clearly to light through the teachings of Luther, Swingle, Bullinger, Farel, Benza, and with emphasis, Calvin and Knox. Calvin's rupture with the

Renaissance included a belief that God's providence or the eternal plan of God is a necessary presupposition for true interpretation of all space-time facts and is foundational to biblically consistent Christian education.[14] Then, too, similar to Knox's implementation of the covenant idea as foundational to the concept of Christian revolution, is the sphere of political thought,[15] Van Til claims this covenant idea is foundational to the concept of uncompromising Christian education. (Knox "cannot but be regarded as one of the chief personal factors in the history of political thought in the sixteenth century" writes J. W. Allen because of Knox's contributions toward the subsequent British and American revolutions.[16])

In the American colonies it was the early Puritans who attempted to educate their children in accord with the biblical position. Compromise with Deism and Rationalism eroded the Puritan's biblical stand.[16] By the early nineteenth century Protestant ecumenicalism, particularly on the frontier, contributed greatly to the formation of early common schools. In their battle against Romanism, barbarism, and skepticism, nondenominational Protestants joined together to educate their children.[17] It was Horace Mann who took great advantage of this nonsectarian compromise. Mann, whose beliefs correlate closer to Deism than Calvinism when he does not assert total depravity, the deity of Christ, and his emphasis of rationality above piety, epitomizes Van Til's compromise claim.[18] (Furthermore, David Tyack and Timothy Smith believe that this nonsectarian Protestant consensus will continue to progress until it is entirely free

from its Protestant bias.[19]) Hence, Van Til maintains that the early compromises which Christians conceded to the new common schools of the nineteenth century have lead to an almost total oblivion of Christian educational distinctives in the twentieth century.

A summary of this brief historical review of Christian compromise indicates that compromise of the sovereign triune God of the Bible has been characteristic of Judeo-Christian history. In addition, positions which completely reject the sovereign triune God of the Bible are antithetical to biblical Christianity, yet many Christian leaders throughout history have attempted synthesizing these two positions. Such efforts at harmony have always compromised the basic assumptions of biblical Christianity and have been destructive to the practice of consistent biblical education. Furthermore, compromise is also a contemporary problem for Christian educators. If contemporary Christian educators fail to face this issue, then they will not clearly draw a line of demarcation in absolute antithesis to non-Christian education and then Christian education will dilute itself into oblivion.

Contemporary Christian Educational Compromise

Compromise among contemporary Christian educators is readily located within so called "Traditional Christian Education." An example of this compromise is provided by A Beka Book Publications. They pride themselves for holding true to traditional Christian education and by making it available for 13,000 Christian schools through their 300 publications. In their view, traditional

Christian education is guided by "common sense, philosophical thinking grounded in common sense, and the Bible."[20] Also, they claim that "the sources for understanding how human beings think and, therefore, how they ought to be taught are common sense, philosophical thinking grounded in common sense, and the Word of God."[21] Throughout this view of education, including methods, curriculum, discipline, and philosophy, common sense is equated with the Bible as being authoritative. It is inconsistent for Christian school educators to say that the sovereign triune God of the Bible is their unique distinctive, authority, and foundation while, in practice, adhering to rationalistic, common sense.

Dr. Frank Gaebelein, a justly celebrated and learned leader of twentieth century Christian schools, discussed the question of how to determine the truth. His answer was that, "ours is the approach by way of revelation plus reason."[22] With this view Gaebelein seeks to avoid irrationalism and pure rationalism or humnism.[23] However, he fails to understand that consistent Christian education must be built exclusively upon revelation. Revelation alone does not lead to irrationalism, rather it is based upon the ultimate, absolute rationalism of the triune God of the Bible. God's perspective is all-comprehensive, infinite, and only is seemingly irrational or paradoxial to finite human minds.[24] Thus, Van Til believes that American Fundamentalism, A Beka Book Publications, or the evangelical form of Gaebelein's Christian education, retain the compromising principle of human autonomy and the myth of neutrality within their view of Christian schools.[25]

Van Til's Solution to Christian School Compromise

In order for Christian educators and Christian schools to avoid compromise and inconsistency in their educational ideology, they must build their entire educational program exclusively upon the covenant which the Creator and sovereign triune God of the Bible has made with Christian people. Hence, it must be understood by Christians that a separation between religion and culture is unthinkable.[16] Only when creation revelation (facts) and supernatural revelation (Bible, illuminated by the Holy Spirit) are seen to supplement one another, is man placed in his proper historical perspective.[27] Thus, on the biblical Reformed basis, whatever is in accord with the Bible is educative and whatever is out of accord with the Bible is miseducative.[28]

This foundation must be taught and understood in absolute antithesis with non-Christian educational programs which are based on a priori assumptions of human autonomy, pure contingent factuality, and abstract formal logical validity. Consequently, consistent Christian education will also categorically deny the principle of neutrality. Man's thought and education are not creatively constructive like Kant taught, says Van Til.[29] Rather, man's thought and Christian education are derivative from the Creator-God of the Bible. When resting squarely upon this foundation, neutrality is myth and human predication can be valid because of the authority of the infinite, self-contained and all-sufficient triune God of the Bible.

Footnotes

[1]Cornelius Van Til, Essays on Christian Education (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1974), pp. 79-82.

[2]Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til, ed. E. R. Geeban (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1980), p. 19.

[3]Van Til, Essays on Christian Education, pp. 38-39.

[4]Ibid., pp. 187-209.

[5]Brien V. Manro, How to Service Students with Federal Education Program Benefits (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1978), pp. 6-20.

[6]Van Til, Essays on Christian Education, pp. 49-71.

[7]Jim S. Halsey, For a Time Such As This: In Introduction to the Reformed Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1976). Also see Richard L. Pratt, Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual For the Defense of the Faith (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1979).

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[9]Cornelius Van Til, "Greek Philosophy," tape recording, reel one (Mt. Olive, Mississippi: Mt. Olive Tape Library, 1968).

[10]Cornelius Van Til, "Church Fathers," tape recording (Mt. Olive, Mississippi: Mt. Olive Tape Library, 1968).

[11]James F. Anderson, St. Augustine & Being (The Hague: Martinus Nyhoff, 1965), p. 8.

[12]Cornelius Van Til, A Christian Theory of Knowledge (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1969), p. 169.

[13]Lewis W. Spitz, The Renaissance & Reformation Movements, vol. 1 (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1972), p. 100, 173, 174.

[14]Wallace K. Ferguson, The Renaissance in Historical Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1948), p. 262.

[15]W. Stanford Reid, Trumpeter of God - A Biography of John Knox (NY: Scribner's, 1974), p. 151.

[16]John T. McNeill, The History & Character of Calvinism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 393.

[17]David Tyack, "The Kingdom of God and the Common School: Protestant Ministers and the Educational Awakening in the West," Harvard Educational Review 36 (Fall 1966): 450.

[18]Rober L. Church, Education in the United States (NY: The Free Press, 1976), p. 90.

[19]Tyack, "The Kingdom of God and the Common School," p. 469 and Timothy L. Smith, "Protestant Schooling and American Nationality, 1800-1850," The Journal of American History 53 (March 1967), 695.

[20]A. A. Baker, The Successful Christian School (Pensacola, Florida: A Beka Book Publications, 1979), p. 43.

[21]Ibid., p. 45.

[22]Frank E. Gaebelein, The Pattern of God's Truth (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), p. 29.

[23]Ibid.

[24]John Frame, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," in North, Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1976), pp. 295-330.

[25]Van Til, Essays in Christian Education, pp. 76-89.

[26]Ibid., pp. 27-28, 33.

[27]Ibid., p. 80

[28]Ibid., p. 81.

[29]Ibid., pp. 133-134.